



Committee on Foreign Affairs

CHAIRMAN ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN



**Chairman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen
Opening Statement at Hearing:
“Democracy Held Hostage in Nicaragua: Part 1”
December 1, 2011 at 10:30am**

Twenty-five years ago, President Ronald Reagan assisted freedom fighters in pushing back the cancer of communism that Daniel Ortega and the Sandinistas were spreading into Nicaragua. At that time, another Florida Member was Chairing the Foreign Affairs Committee. The distinguished Dante Fascell, my friend and mentor, had witnessed and heard first hand from his constituents fleeing communism about what was taking place in Nicaragua. Dante Fascell decided, as he always did, to stand for freedom and democracy against the oppressive tactics employed by the likes of Daniel Ortega.

Today, I am proud to carry the torch and do the same for the people of Nicaragua, although not as well nor as valiantly as Chairman Fascell did. I am standing for U.S. interests against Ortega’s new assault on Nicaragua’s democratic process and institutions. Some may ask: Why is Nicaragua important at all? As one of our fellow witnesses, Ambassador Callahan, wrote before the elections, “Nicaragua matters because Nicaraguans, like people everywhere, matter. They deserve to live in freedom and with dignity.”

In 2008, Ortega orchestrated massive electoral fraud during the municipal elections. This caused the Millennium Challenge Corporation to terminate the remainder of the compact with Nicaragua in 2009, totaling \$62 million dollars. It therefore should come as no surprise that Ortega would pursue the same approach to the recent presidential elections.

But what did we do to prevent this latest affront on the rule of law and constitutional authority? In hopes of receiving cooperation to fight drug trafficking in Central America, the Obama Administration appeared to do nothing. A very small sector within the Nicaraguan military is assisting U.S. counter narcotics operations. U.S. foreign policy can neither be restricted to such narrow objectives in Latin America, nor can we disregard democratic freedoms, starting with the fundamental freedom to elect government leaders.

Broader U.S. interests, such as ensuring long-term stability in Nicaragua and the entire region, are being threatened by Ortega’s actions in conjunction with those of Chavez, Morales, Correa, and others. We cannot afford to let these injustices continue without any consequences.

In October, I sent a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urging the Administration not to recognize the Nicaraguan elections if Daniel Ortega was on the ballot. According to Article 147 of the Nicaraguan Constitution, a candidate cannot serve consecutive terms as President and cannot be President for more than two terms total. Yet, this election would serve as the second consecutive term for Ortega and the third time he is President of Nicaragua. All in clear violation of the country’s constitution.

If the elections results stand, the consequences will prove detrimental to democracy in Nicaragua. Ortega will be able to change the Constitution at will and expand his absolute control over the legislative,

Contact: Committee Press Office, 202-225-5021

judicial, and electoral branches of government. Leading up to the election, Ortega's sympathizers in the Supreme Electoral Council distributed voting identity cards to Ortega sympathizers and denied others their right to vote. The electoral mission led by the European Union and the Organization of American States noted irregularities in the electoral process and said that this election caused a severe setback to democracy in Nicaragua. According to the Nicaraguan Episcopal Conference, "The legitimacy of the electoral process and the respect for the will of the people have been seriously questioned."

These are clear indications of fraud in the electoral process in Nicaragua. The Department of State appears to agree that the elections were not transparent and that the Supreme Electoral Council did not operate impartially, nor transparently. Thus, the U.S. must not recognize Daniel Ortega as Nicaragua's leader and should call for new free, fair, and transparent elections to be held, that are in keeping with Nicaragua's constitution and reflect the will of the Nicaraguan people. The Administration should also hold on any nomination of a new U.S. Ambassador for Nicaragua until this issue is resolved.

Similarly, the OAS should look to its own Charter, and reaffirm the preamble to the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which clearly state that "Representative democracy is indispensable for the stability, peace, and development of the region." Rather than putting its efforts in re-integrating the Cuban regime into the OAS, for example, the OAS must act quickly to re-institute democratic order in Nicaragua.

September 2011 marked the 10-year anniversary of the Inter-American Democratic Charter. In light of recent developments in Nicaragua and the OAS' and regional inaction, we need to evaluate the Charter and determine if it needs to be reformed to ensure it is living up to its mandated defense of democracy and prevention of democratic demise, as is taking place in Nicaragua. Daniel Ortega is also trying to silence his critics by blocking the local major newspaper, La Prensa, from distributing its newspaper to a wide circulation. Threatening the freedom of the press is just another tactic by Ortega to prevent the Nicaraguan people and the whole outside world from learning the realities of his dictatorship.

But Nicaraguans will not be deterred. This Saturday, thousands of courageous Nicaraguans will, once again, march down the streets of Managua to peacefully protest Ortega's power grab. As the famous Nicaraguan poet Ruben Darío once said, "If the nation is small, one dreams it great." The Nicaraguan people dream of a day that they will be free from the control of tyrants and it is our moral obligation to uphold the rule of law and democratic order to help them fulfill their dream.